

Ursula of Cologne

(d. 4th Century)

BRIEFING

Ursula (Latin for 'little she-bear') was a Romano-British virgin and martyr possibly of royal origin. She is venerated as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church and the Anglican Communion. Her feast day in the pre-1970 General Roman Calendar and in some regional calendars of the ordinary form of the Roman Rite is 21 October.

HISTORY

There is little information about Ursula or the anonymous group of holy virgins who accompanied her and, on an uncertain date, were killed along with her at Colonia Agrippina. They remain in the Roman Martyrology, although their commemoration does not appear in the simplified General Roman Calendar of the 1970 Missale Romanum.

The earliest evidence of a cult of martyred virgins at Cologne is an inscription from c. 400 in the Church of St. Ursula, located on Ursulaplatz in Cologne. This inscription commonly referred to as the Clematius Inscription states that the ancient basilica had been restored by senator Clematius on the site where the holy virgins were killed. The earliest source to name one of these virgins as "Ursula" dates from the 10th century.

Her legendary fame comes from a medieval story with many variations. The tale depicts a princess, Ursula having already promised herself to Christ, but not allowed to reject the request of her father, the semi-legendary King Dionotus of Dumnonia in south-west Britain in the late-4th century, to marry the pagan governor Conan Meriadoc of Armorica delaying her matrimony by three years. During these three years, Ursula would partake in a pan-European pilgrimage. During these three years she would be accompanied by 10 virgins that would subsequently be accompanied by 1,000 virgins each. She headed for Rome with her followers and persuaded the Pope, Cyriacus (unknown in the pontifical records, though from late AD 384 there was a Pope Siricius), and Sulpicius, bishop of Ravenna, to join them. After setting out for Cologne, which was being besieged by Huns, all the virgins were beheaded in a massacre. The Huns' leader fatally shot Ursula with an arrow in about AD 383 (the date varies). When the Huns tried to loot the companions' ships, they discover eleven legions of soldiers aboard which scared the Huns out of the city of Cologne.

There is only one church dedicated to Saint Ursula in the United Kingdom. It is located in Wales at Llangwryfon, Ceredigion.

The Ursulines and the Virgin Islands are named after Saint Ursula and her companions.

LEGEND OF SAINT URSULA AND THE ELEVEN THOUSAND COMPANIONS

Lack of historical credibility

The (1912) article on Ursula states that "this legend, with its countless variants and increasingly fabulous developments, would fill more than a hundred pages. Various characteristics of it were already regarded with suspicion by certain medieval writers, and since [Caesar] Baronius have been universally rejected". Neither Jerome nor Gregory of Tours refers to Ursula in his writings. Gregory of Tours mentions the legend of the Theban Legion, to whom a church that once stood in Cologne was dedicated. The most important hagiographers (Bede, Ado, Usuard, Notker the Stammerer, Hrabanus Maurus) of the early Middle Ages also do not enter Ursula under 21 October, her feast day.

10th Century legend

A legend resembling Ursula's appeared in the first half of the tenth century; it does not mention the name , but rather gives the leader of the martyred group as or . Pinnosa's relics were transferred about 947 from Cologne to Essen, and from this point forward Ursula's role was emphasised. In 970, for example, the first was written, naming Ursula rather than Pinnosa as the group's leader (although Pinnosa is mentioned as one of the group's members). This change might also be due in part to the discovery at this time of an epitaph speaking of Ursula, the "innocent virgin".

Misreading of Latin

According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, a 12th-century British cleric and writer, Ursula was the daughter of Dionotus, ruler of Cornwall. However, this may have been based on his misreading of the words in the second , written about 1105. The plot may have been influenced by a story told by the 6th-century writer Procopius about a British queen sailing with 100,000 soldiers to the mouth of the Rhine in order to compel her unwilling groom Radigis, king of the Varni, to marry her.

While there was a tradition of virgin martyrs in Cologne by the fifth century, their number may have been limited to between two and eleven, according to different sources. Yet the cleric Wandelbert of the Abbey of Prüm stated in his martyrology in 848 that the number of martyrs counted "thousands of saints" who were slaughtered on the boards of the River Rhine. The figure of 11,000 first appears in the late-9th century; suggestions as to where this number came from have included the reading of a name or as a number, or reading the letters as 'eleven thousand [in Roman numerals] virgins' rather than as 'eleven martyred virgins'. One scholar has suggested that in the eighth or ninth century, when the relics of virgin martyrs were found, they included those of a girl named Ursula, who was eleven years old—in Latin, . This was subsequently misread or misinterpreted as ('eleven thousand'), thus producing the legend of the 11,000 virgins. In fact, the stone bearing the virgin Ursula's name states that she lived eight years and two months. Another theory suggests that there was only one virgin martyr, named Undecimilla, "which by some blundering monk was changed into eleven thousand". It has also been suggested that , "with [...] soldiers", was misread as , "with [...] thousands". Most contemporary sources, however, cling to the number 11,000. The from the 970s tries to bridge conflicting traditions by stating that the eleven maidens each commanded a ship containing one thousand virgins. Implicitly, the legend also refers to the twelve heavenly legions, mentioned in Matthew 26:53.

Skeletal remains

The Basilica of St. Ursula in Cologne holds the alleged relics of Ursula and her 11,000 companions. It contains what has been described as a "veritable tsunami of ribs, shoulder blades, and femurs ... arranged in zigzags and swirls and even in the shapes of Latin words". The Goldene Kammer (Golden Chamber), a 17th-century chapel attached to the Basilica of St. Ursula, contains sculptures of their heads and torsos, "some of the heads encased in silver, others covered with stuff of gold and caps of cloth of gold and velvet; loose bones thickly texture the upper walls". The peculiarities of the relics themselves have thrown doubt upon the historicity of Ursula and her 11,000 maidens. When skeletons of little children ranging in age from two months to seven years were found buried with one of the sacred virgins in 1183, Hermann Joseph, a Praemonstratensian canon at Steinfeld, explained that they were distant relatives of the eleven thousand. A surgeon of eminence was once banished from Cologne for suggesting that, among the collection of bones which are said to pertain to the heads, there were several belonging to full-grown mastiffs. The relics may have come from a forgotten burial ground. Parts of a skull attributed to St. Ursula were reportedly brought to Ireland in the early 1700s and is held at the Galway City Museum in Ireland.

Official stance of the Roman Catholic Church

Nothing reliable is known about the girls said to have been martyred at the spot. A commemoration of Saint Ursula and her companions in the Mass of Saint Hilarion, formerly in the General Roman Calendar on 21 October, was removed in 1969, because "their is entirely fabulous: nothing, not even their names, is known about the virgin saints who were killed at Cologne at some uncertain time". However, they are still mentioned in the Roman Martyrology, the official but professedly incomplete list of saints recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, which speaks of them as follows: "At Cologne in Germany, commemoration of virgin saints who ended their life in martyrdom for Christ in the place where afterwards the city's basilica was built, dedicated in honour of the innocent young girl Ursula who is looked on as their leader".

VENERATION

Roman Catholic order

- The Order of Ursulines, founded in 1535 by Angela Merici, and devoted to the education of young girls, has also helped to spread Ursula's name throughout the world. Ursula was named the patroness saint of school girls.

Celebrations

- The town of Binangonan in the province of Rizal in the Philippines also has a church dedicated to Saint Ursula, where her feast is celebrated on 21 October. A fluvial procession at Laguna Lake is carried out to commemorate Ursula's journey. It is made up of a group of men and women in colourful, traditional Filipino costumes dancing in the streets with the image of Ursula and chanting joyfully. Prior to her feast day, a nine-day novena is held at the 224-year-old Santa Ursula Church. During this novena, a woman is assigned as cantor to sing a chant in honour of Ursula.
- The town of Valls, Catalonia, Spain, celebrates the " " in the days around 21 October. The fair concludes on the Sunday after 21 October with "one of the most important" castell (human tower) competitions. Hildegard of Bingen composed many chants in honour of Ursula.

Church music and art

- Catherine of Bologna is credited with painting one if not two images of St. Ursula.

- Michael Haydn wrote the _____ to commemorate the day Ursula Oswald joined a Benedictine Abbey.
- Hans Memling fashioned during the 1480s a wooden shrine that contained the relics of Ursula, which is now at the Hans Memling Museum in Bruges. It tells the story of Ursula in six bow-arched panels, with the two front panels showing Ursula accompanied by 10 virgins, each representing 1,000 virgins.
- There is also a painting by Caravaggio, _____ in the Galleria d'Italia in Naples. His last known work.
- An early Renaissance masterpiece of Tomaso da Modena is the cycle of St Ursula in Treviso.

Places named after her companions

- Christopher Columbus named the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean in her honour when sailing past them in 1493.
- Ferdinand Magellan rounded Cape Virgenes on 21 October 1520, and entered the Straits of Magellan, naming the cape after Ursula's virgins.
- João Álvares Fagundes, a Portuguese explorer, gave in 1521 the name _____ to what is now known as Saint-Pierre and Miquelon.
- Basel, a Swiss city about 400 km south of Cologne, has tradition of Ursula and her companions passing through Basel intending to go to Rome. The legend gave name to the Eleven Thousand Virgins Alley (_____), which climbs one side of the Münsterberg, a hill in the center of the city.

UK an Anglican Church

- The small village of Llangwryfon, near Aberystwyth in west Wales, has a church dedicated to Ursula. The village name translates as 'Church of the Virgins'.
- There are Anglican churches dedicated to Saint Ursula in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, the United States and the Caribbean.
- The street in London called St Mary Axe is named after the Church of St Mary Axe, originally dedicated to Saint Mary the Virgin, Saint Ursula and the 11,000 virgins. It was demolished in the late 16th century; the site is located close to where the skyscraper informally known as _____ now stands. A manuscript dated 1514 claims that the church contained a holy relic: an axe used by the Huns to execute the virgins.
- Whitelands College in Roehampton, London, the oldest educational institution of the Church of England, has been under the patronage of Saint Ursula since its formation. She is the patroness saint of the college's chapel.

Visions

It was recorded that Elizabeth of Schönau experienced a vision that revealed to her the martyrdom of Ursula and her companions.

Ursula's companion

Cordula was, according to a legend in an edition of the _____ presented in an English translation on a traditionalist Catholic website, one of Ursula's companions: "Being terrified by the punishments and slaughter of the others, Cordula hid herself, but repenting her deed, on the next day she declared herself to the Huns of her own accord, and thus was the last of them all to receive the crown of martyrdom". In his _____, Joachim Sighart recounts that, on 14 February 1277, while work was being done at the church of St John the Baptist (_____) in Cologne, Cordula's body was discovered; it was fragrant and on her forehead was written: _____. When Albert the Great heard of the finding, he sang mass and transferred the relics. Later, Cordula's supposed remains were moved to Königswinter and Rimini. Cordula's head was claimed by the Cathedral of Palencia. She is listed in the _____ on 22 October.

CORDULA OF COLOGNE

Cordula of Cologne, also known as Saint Cordula, is an apocryphal saint. She was venerated in the Catholic Church as a companion of St. Ursula and her feast day was on 22 October, but she has not been listed in the _____ since 1969 due to doubts about her historicity.

Biography

According to medieval folklore, she was one of the companions of St. Ursula who is said to have come from Brittany to Cologne in the fourth century. There, Ursula and with her eleven thousand virgins were killed by Hunnic invaders. Cordula hid away to escape the fate of her companions, but stung by her conscience, she emerged the day after the massacre and was also killed.

Veneration

Around the middle of the twelfth century, the nun Helentrudis from the convent of Heerse claimed that she had been visited in her dream by a young woman who informed her that she was a companion of St. Ursula and that her name was Cordula. Since that time, Cordula started to be venerated as a saint. Her alleged body was found in 1278 in the vineyard of the commandery of the St. Johan commandery of the Knights Hospitallers when one of their knights also had a nightly visitation by Cordula. Her remains were then translated (possibly by Albertus Magnus himself) to the chapel of the commandery where they were interred. In overcoming her fears and joining her companions in martyrdom, she served as a model for addressing and conquering human hesitation.

The veneration of St. Cordula, St. Ursula and her companions spread soon beyond the borders of Cologne to Osnabrück, Valenciennes, Marchiennes and Tortosa. This was facilitated primarily via monastic communities and in the thirteenth century the Dominicans promoted their cult not only through material relics but also by hagiographic productions which were often sung during Matins in the refectory.

Her cult was especially strong among female orders and convents. Wienhausen Abbey received at some point a relic of St. Cordula from Cologne, possibly together with those of St. Ursula, St. Maurice and St. Gregory, showing the close ties the abbey had with the metropolitan see of Cologne. The Cammin Casket of the Cathedral of Saint John in Cammin contained another part of the body of St. Cordula.

Her veneration spread as far as the Convent of Jesus in Aveiro, Portugal, where a statue of her can be found in the chapel of Our Lady of Conception and it is possible that a relic of Cordula was also present. Special songs and devotion dedicated to St. Cordula and the other Cologne virgins show the special place the cult took in the female convent.

While she was still listed in the Martyrologium Romanum of 1961, she is not recorded in the Martyrologium Romanum as of 2004. The official stance of the Catholic Church is that the story of St. Ursula and her eleven thousand companions "is entirely fabulous: nothing, not even their names, is known about the virgin saints who were killed at Cologne at some uncertain time". As of 2004, the Martyrologium Romanum entry for 21 October mentions only St. Ursula and her companions without numbering them at eleven thousand or mentioning Cordula specifically.

In popular culture

The story of Cordula was also depicted in art, such as in the late fifteenth century panel of the

Cordula appeared as St. Ursula's confidant in the opera *Die Jungfrau von Orléans* by Andrea Salvadori. As such, she was the secondary female role in the opera, a role first filled by Francesca Caccini. Czech Pop singer Aneta Langerová has on her fourth album *Na Radosti* a song named after Cordula.

SIMILARITIES WITH SUNNIVA

There are striking parallels between the 11th-century legend of Ursula and the story of Sunniva of Selje. Their names were sometimes confused by contemporaries. Both saints were considered to be Christian princesses who fled their homeland by ship in order to postpone or avert an undesired marriage with a pagan king. Both were accompanied by a large group of associates, both became victims of hostile foes. The development of their legends may have been interdependent. The martyrdom of Sunniva, however, took place after the first draft of the